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ABSTRACT

Most faculty in communication departments find themselves in one of two "camps": theory or production. Better integration of the two will help to clarify the role communication departments play in the academic community, begin a more fertile and generative relationship among faculty, and establish a centered and coherent curriculum for students. Specific suggestions for teaching production courses in the undergraduate curriculum are: (1) focus on process rather than on product; (2) organize assignments so that they use the analysis of techniques which transform reality into images; and (3) help students understand the structures, the assumptions, and the biases of the media environments in which they are immersed. These suggestions will assist students to engage the visual as well as the written texts of American history and culture and offer them a curriculum that will develop their critical abilities. (MS)

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THE INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRODUCTION IN UNDERGRADUATE COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS

or

WHAT PLATO CAN TEACH US ABOUT CURRICULUM

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Communication departments, especially those which view themselves as situated within a humanistic or liberal arts tradition, are often plagued by misunderstanding and confusion. Some of the misunderstanding may result from our recency in academe--We are the new kids on the block. Other problems arise from the interdisciplinary nature of communication studies, along with the wide variety of research goals we pursue and methods we employ. Much of the confusion can be traced to the attempts of most departments to join analytical studies with practical or production oriented training. It is this last point--the question of integrating theory and production--which I will address today.

Some schools maintain separate departments directed towards theory or production. More often, communication faculty find themselves in one of two "camps" within the same department. We mark the boundaries by referring to each other as "production" people or "theory" people. (On occasion, other names are used.) In one sense, we are like a couple who sleep in the same bed but don't copulate: The relationship is barren.

Today, as succinctly as I can, I will offer a justification for a balance of theory and production in the

undergraduate curriculum and propose, in brief, a curricular framework to accomplish it. I do so with the hope that a better integration of theory and production will help to clarify our role in the academic community, begin a more fertile and generative relationship among faculty, and of greatest importance, establish a centered and coherent curriculum for our students.

Let me begin by offering my view of what the primary goal for a production component should *not* be. First, the goal shouldn't be to train students for technical careers in the film or video industries. Even if our departments were adequately funded and supplied for such a task, mere technical training is a trivial goal for an academic institution. Further, the paucity of available production jobs, and the low starting salaries would seem to indicate that the industry doesn't require our services as trainers.(For example, a secretary with basic skills can command a higher salary than entry-level production jobs currently offer.)

I think a production component in a communication department should serve a purpose similar to that of writing in an English department, (or for that matter, in *any* academic department). We don't expect most English majors to become novelists or essayists. Rather we view writing as a tool to engage the written texts of our history and our culture. We require our students to write essays and term papers to develop their skills as effective *readers*: to bring their critical facilities to bear upon the written text; to

understand theme and purpose, tone and texture, voice and viewpoint. Media production courses should serve a similar purpose.

Let me point out the obvious: For the average American, the texts of our time are increasingly written in electronic images. Our public political dialog is performed in and through television. News and public affairs reach us through cable and broadcast signals. Our history takes the forms of documentary and docudrama. Through the 30-second spot and home shopping clubs, television sings our markets electric. In such a world, our students require *active* experience with the structures of the new media.

Many of us feel that students already spend too much time with television, radio and film. Indeed, the number of hours spent is staggering. However, it is *passive* time. Watching and listening neither encourage nor teach them how to engage these media, nor the realities behind the mediated images.

The point I am making has already been made by educational philosophers from Plato to Piaget. It is simply this: that concrete knowledge is a pre-requisite for more formal or theoretical activity. In fact, Plato's parable of the cave is a near-perfect example of the problem I am addressing, and the solution I will propose.

In Plato's cave, the prisoners have spent their lives with necks and legs fettered, seeing only the two-dimensional shadows of an arranged puppet show. With no awareness of the mechanism by which the shadows are generated, the prisoners'

only world is the world of shadows. The underlying philosophy (or ideology) of such people might be called "shadow empiricism". Our students share a similar philosophy, although I call it "photo-empiricism".

I will share with you a statement made recently by one of my students in response to the question, "What are some of the differences between print news and television news?" He said:

> With print news, the reader is less able to create his own opinion because the writer can see the story as he wants and present it that way. Television news has pictures, so we can see what is going on and form our own opinion.

This student displays a healthy, if rudimentary, cynicism of the written word. He understands that words are made by people: people with different viewpoints, different intentions, different voices. On the other hand, he is also a photo-empiricist. The belief in the reality of pictures expressed here is typical, almost unshakeable and, I think, dangerous.

He doesn't recognize that a camera takes a viewpoint; that events are framed and punctuated by the cameraperson and by the editor. He doesn't know that his response to an image can also be conditioned by the sounds that are attached to it. To be more concrete: He has never asked himself why President Reagan is so often seen entering or emerging from Air Force One. Or, why the jet engines are always screaming. Or, why the event is punctuated so that we don't see him at ground level, but only at the top of the stairs, above the crowd. The image of the dynamic and heroic leader about to mount his straining

steed is a poetic creation of the President's media staff. To our photo-empirical student, the mythic qualities of the image seem to be part of the event.

I don't mean to focus only on images that are so consciously manipulated. As we watch the nightly horror of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, our responses and sympathies can be influenced by whether the camera stands with one side or the other. The burden of guilt may appear to shift if the footage is edited so that an Israeli fires first, or if a Palestinian throws a firebomb. Our view of the event may vary if we hear the potent crack of rifle fire, or the sickening thud of a bullet hitting flesh.

To our photo-empirical students, the shadows on the screen are real. The screen borders are the limits of the knowable. The camera's perspective is the only one conceivable. The order of things seen is the natural order of causality.

How do we teach our students to engage, rather than receive these images? Plato's parable may again serve us. When the prisoner is released from his bonds, he is not immediately led up into the sunlight. Rather, Plato first compels him to study the mechanism by which the shadows were created. He is shown the fire, the performers and the objects which together, cast the shadows. In short, to Plato, the first step toward truth was to study the medium that presented it. The first course in his curriculum might have been called, "Introduction to Shadow Production."

To return to our students, and more modern media, I suggest that hands-on experience with our information technologies is essential to the development of critical skills in an image-based world.

Since my time is limited, let me suggest, in bare outline, an approach to teaching production so that these courses are integrated into the undergraduate curriculum. First, the focus must be on *process* rather than *product*. Too often the criteria for success in production courses have been the same criteria that underlie Hollywood and television production. By that I mean that techniques are to remain hidden, so that the final media event seems to be merely an open window through which reality can be seen and heard. It will be more useful for production courses to aim at an analysis of the techniques which transform reality into images.

I will suggest some assignments which may further this type of analysis. Our students should be required to shoot an event two ways so that each version has a different impact or viewpoint. They should create a film or video which manipulates time--and one that doesn't. They should create another which contains a space that doesn't exist--and one that appears to be a faithful copy. Finally--and this is my favorite--they should all be required to go out and *photograph a fact*.

From such assignments, and the discussions they will generate, our students may begin to understand the structures,

the assumptions and the biases of the media environments in which they are immersed. I think that concrete, hands-on experience is a necessity for a richer understanding of theoretical and analytical questions. This last point brings me to my real motive: I want students in my theory courses who have begun to question the mediated world they live in; students who have begun to question their own photo-empiricism, their own uncritical acceptance of images. In short, I want students who can begin to engage the visual as well as the written texts of our history and our culture.

I am not certain that the role of production courses which I have outlined will make our students better media producers. But, that is not my primary purpose. I feel more certain that such a curriculum will develop their critical abilities. It may help them begin to question the shadows on the wall and better prepare them for the journey out of the cave and up into the light.